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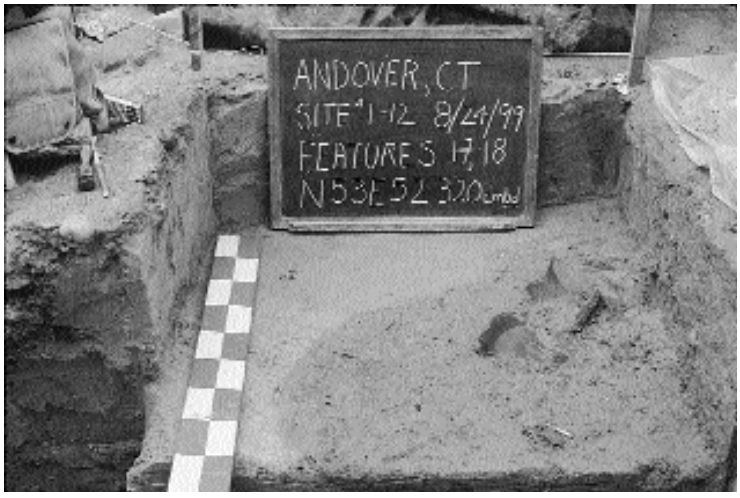
Foodways in 18th Century Connecticut

In 1999 and 2000, Public Archaeology Survey Team, Inc (PAST) completed archeological investigations of three 18th-century homestead sites in Connecticut. These archeological sites were found hidden under cultivated fields during archeological reconnaissance surveys which preceded road improvements proposed by the Connecticut Department of Transportation. The two excavated sites include the Sprague Homestead in Andover and the Goodsell Homestead in North Branford, which are still undergoing inventory and analysis. The Daniels Homestead in Waterford is about to undergo excavation this fall. By combining thorough archeological excavation and recovery methods with in-depth documentary research, these sites are providing rare and important opportunities to better understand many facets of everyday rural life in 18th-century Connecticut, especially foodways.

The Sprague site, located in rural Andover, represents one of the first European homesteads in what was then the newly incorporated town of Lebanon. Nestled in the Hop River Valley, the property was settled by Captain Ephraim Sprague of Duxbury, Massachusetts, in 1705, at which time Lebanon was part of an extensive insular frontier in the Connecticut colony's northeast uplands. Along with his farming activities, Sprague was elected to the position of captain in Lebanon's North Parish train band in 1724 and served in the Northhampton, Massachusetts, region during Grey Lock's (Lovewell's) War in 1724-1725. At various times, Sprague was also a Lebanon selectman, represented the town in Connecticut's General Assembly, and served as a deacon in Eleazor Wheelock's North Society Church.



Storage pits discovered in the floor of the main cellar of the Sprague Homestead in Andover, Connecticut. Photo courtesy PAST Inc.

The excavation of the Sprague site uncovered numerous features, including a deep, dry-laid stone-lined main cellar with an outside stone-step entrance. Excavation of the lower strata of the cellar revealed concentrations of charred timbers, artifacts, and food remains indicating that the house had burned down sometime in the mid-18th century. Within the sand floor of the cellar were found eight subterranean storage pits, with one pit open and in use at the time the house burned; the remaining pits had been backfilled with sand. Other important discoveries include a large rectangular, ash-filled feature north of the cellar, perhaps representing the location of a large hearth and a second large cellar to the north of the ash feature at the opposite end of the house. The lack of any archeological evidence for subsurface foundation footings at the site indicates that the house sills likely sat on laid stone pads or very low foundation walls that were obliterated by plowing. A well and several small outside open-air hearths were also found. The plan of the Sprague site suggests that the main structure was of the "long house" tradition common in the western uplands of England, Wales, Scotland, and Ireland and which had originated from earlier Celtic dwelling forms. The Sprague house was approximately 15' x 60' in size, a 4:1 ratio. Although no intact standing long house structures remain in North America today, sites of this post-medieval house form have been excavated in the Duxbury-Plymouth region of Massachusetts, in Maine, and in Virginia (Deetz 1977; Bradley 1989). A similar form of long house is further illustrated in a 1699 drawing of the Saco Fort and has been reconstructed from probate inventories (Candee 1987; St. George 1986). Ephraim Sprague moved to Connecticut from Duxbury; the Sprague family originated

from the West Country uplands of England, which had a predominant long house tradition. Interestingly, Captain Sprague, a third-generation American, appears to have continued an "old world" building tradition.

Because the entire house burned and the contents were left behind as fill in the two cellars, information on foodways from the Sprague homestead site is extensive. The fire preserved botanical and faunal evidence through carbonization and the heavy ash filtration changed the normal acidic soil to alkaline, which promoted extraordinary organic preservation. Faunal evidence includes the bones of cow, pig, sheep, deer, and birds; eggshells; fish bones and scales; saltwater and freshwater shells; and antler. Carbonized botanical food remains recovered include barley, oats, corn, beans, and hickory nuts. The botanical and faunal evidence indicates an extensive blending of old and new world foods in the Spragues' diet. The recovery of a beaver incisor from the main cellar floor suggests that beaver were still being taken from the region despite the extensive trapping and fur-trading activities during the 17th century. A cache of antler with the tines sawn off, plus worked antler and other homemade tools, demonstrate Sprague's frontier skills at catching and converting game into food, tools, and perhaps other items as well.

Foodways-related material culture includes a scythe handle, a sickle, a shovel blade, gun flints, ball and shot of varying sizes, and a fishhook. Various earthenware pans, bowls, and pots were recovered, as were table knives and forks, drinking glass and liquor bottle fragments, and virtually an entire English white salt-glazed stoneware tea set. Captain Sprague's will and probate inventory indicate that at the end of his life in November/December of 1754, 69 years old, he was maintaining only a few animals including a cow and 13 sheep and that he had stored up "corn of all sorts, meat, sauces of all sorts, with two swine now a-fatting." The picture of Sprague, only just emerging as the botanical, faunal, and artifact analysis progress, is one of a man who spanned several worlds. He lived in an old-style house, kept domesticated animals but also hunted, and enjoyed a fine tea set but still made his own tools of antler and cut-up brass kettles. He was a representative to Connecticut's assembly, yet fought alongside Native Americans in a colonial and Indian war. Sprague, with his fine cufflinks and large quantity of trade beads, moved easily between roles. The archeological remains of his burned house will permit detailed reconstruction of the foodways of a frontiersman in southern New England, something which has never been done.

The homestead site investigated in North Branford was purchased and settled by Samuel Goodsell of East Haven c. 1735. In 1752, Samuel was accidentally "killed by a log at a sawmill" of which he was part owner. Following Samuel Goodsell's untimely death, the farm was thereafter occupied by his widow Lydia and their daughter Martha. Martha died in 1792 and her mother died c. 1797. At this time, the house was abandoned and the land was sold off by the surviving Goodsell children. Like the Sprague site, archeological and documentary research of the Goodsell homestead offers important opportunities for better understanding lifeways of the period, with a particular focus on the lives of the women who resided there alone for 45 of the house's 62 years of occupancy. The excavation of the site uncovered two cellars, a well, and other smaller features. Like the Sprague site, the Goodsell house sills were likely laid on surface level stone pads and not on subsurface foundations.

Faunal remains recovered from the Goodsell homestead include cow, pig, sheep, deer, bird, fish, and eggshells, as well as considerable quantities of saltwater shellfish such as soft-shelled clam, quahog, oyster, and whelk. Many charred botanical remains such as corn were also recovered in flotation samples and will be analyzed in the near future. The 1752 probate inventory of Samuel Goodsell provides detailed information regarding the Goodsells' farm and household economy. Along with a three-acre apple orchard, the Goodsells had a cider mill, various barrels, funnels and bottles, and barrels of cider in varying stages of processing including raw, boiled and apple beer. A bottle glass fragment with the initials "MG" was recovered from the site, presumably representing the initials of the daughter Martha Goodsell. The Goodsells also had stores of oats, rye, barley, wheat and maslin (mixed grains), beehives, and numerous cows, pigs, and sheep. Farming tools mentioned in the probate include a plow, harrow, threshing flail, hoes, forks, shovels, scythes, and other implements. Other important subsistence-related items named in the probate include a set of oyster tongs and a

Faunal remains being excavated from Feature 19, a hearth locus, at the Sprague Homestead in Andover, Connecticut. Photo courtesy PAST Inc.

cockle riddle (strainer) for gathering shellfish, a pigeon net, and a gun.

Subsistence-related artifacts recovered during the excavation of the Goodsell homestead include table knives and forks, gun flints, lead ball and shot of varying sizes, glass liquor bottle and tumbler fragments, cast-iron kettle fragments, and pewter spoons. A very diverse range of ceramics were recovered during the excavation and include English slipware and slip-decorated red earthenware plates and dishes and matching English white salt-glazed stoneware and creamware plates in the "Royal" pattern.

The Daniels homestead in Waterford is another important 18th-century Connecticut archeological site. Thomas and Hannah Daniels came to the area c.1713 and appear to have been farmers of the middling sort. Thomas Daniels' probate of 1735 indicates that the homestead was comprised of approximately 67 acres of land with cattle, sheep, pigs, and three teams of oxen. At the time of his death, Daniels was well equipped with the necessary farming implements of the time such as stubbing and broad hoes and plow irons, as well as the basic food preparation items such as kettles, pots and hooks, a trammel, pewter spoons, earthenware, wooden dishes, and the like. The Daniels family also had an orchard. Hannah's probate inventory, recorded 10 years later in 1745, depicts a widow with few possessions, the animals included only a cow and calf, a hog, and two geese and nine goslings.

The archeological assemblage from a small sample of the site has produced a wide range of materials consistent with the occupation of the area during the first half of the 18th century. Some of the items include red earthenware, German blue and gray stoneware, delftware, kaolin pipe fragments, glass liquor bottle fragments, hand-forged nails, window glass, shell mortar, and significant amounts of shell and bone, particularly cow. A full-scale archeological excavation began during winter 2000 and will continue through spring 2001.

Although only in the initial stages of analysis, these three archeological sites are providing new and significant insights into the lifeways of rural colonial Connecticut. In 18th-century New England, the harvesting, collecting, and processing of material culture and food storage were undergoing important changes in technology, strategies, and experimentation (McMahon 1994). Together, these sites will contribute to the creation of more meaningful regional cultural patterns of rural 18th-century life. Importantly, these three archeological homesteads illustrate the everyday lives of people who were the vast majority of the colonial Connecticut's population.

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